The Cradle of Homo Sapiens

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THE CRADLE OF HOMO SAPIENS

The area of the earth's surface in which the direct ancestors of modern man developed has long engaged the attention of anthropologists.

At the outset, it must be stated that even at this time it is by no means certain in which definite locality this great cultural advance took place. However, in view of the enormous wealth of scientific evidence obtained through various world-wide anthropological researches, I venture to suggest that southwestern Asia, including the adjoining African territory, may well have nurtured the development of Homo Sapiens.

Let us state the case for and against each of the five continents as having been the cradle of mankind. Everyone will agree that all available evidence would militate against either the American continent or Australia as having been the area where neanthropic man developed. The simple dismissal of these two continents may suggest an easy solution, but this is far from being the case.

With regard to Europe, there is abundant archaeological evidence that Man inhabited this continent from pre-Chellean times, but the general consensus of opinion is that western Europe was the region into which prehistoric man migrated from the east or south.

In view of the sporadic distribution of Pre-Neanderthal man, including Sinanthropus, Pithecanthropus, Soloensis, Eoanthropus, Heidelbergensis, and Oldoway, it is impossible to state with any degree of certainty the cradle of the human race, although Central Asia is the more probable location.

We are thus inevitably faced with the evidence for Asia and Africa, and from the following statements it will be observed that the writer favors a mild compromise in this respect.

The oldest human remains which have yet been found are from the most widely scattered regions of Europe, Africa and Asia. Dr. L. S. B. Leakey claims that Oldoway in Kenya Colony, British East Africa, marks the most ancient geological horizon containing human bones. This contention is disputed by Sir Arthur Keith and other eminent anthropologists.

Sinanthropus pekinensis, master of fire and maker of flint tools, lived in a cave at Chou Kou Tien near Peiping, at the suggested date of approximately one million years ago.

On the island of Java lived the semi-erect creature known as Pithecanthropus erectus. The approximate date during which this ape-Man wandered beside the banks of the Bengawan River is believed to be in the neighborhood of five thousand centuries before the Christian era.

During September, 1931, three fragmentary skulls of Homo (Javanthropus) soloensis were found in Pleistocene deposits in Java. The cephalic index of the


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first skull of this new species corresponds with that of the Neanderthal type, and Sir Arthur Keith suggests that “this ancient skull represents a stage in the evolution of man which corresponds to that reached by Neanderthal man in Europe.”

From South Africa we have Homo rhodesiensis, which bears several primitive characters, but its antiquity still remains doubtful, so that it should be mentioned but not included in the final summary.

The oldest European remains are Eoanthropus dawsoni from Piltdown in Sussex, and Homo heidelbergensis from the Mauer sandpit near Heidelberg.

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The accompanying map (Fig. 1) shows the general location of these discoveries and the wide separation between Piltdown, Oldway, Peiping and Java will be observed.

It does not seem probable to me that any of these four localities could have been the original point from which the earliest men migrated. The distances combined with many geographical barriers would tend to make a theory of this nature untenable. I suggest that an area more or less equidistant from the outer edges of Europe, Asia and Africa may indeed be the center in which development took place. It will therefore be necessary to examine the climatological and archaeological evidences for this chosen land.

As regards the climate and habitability of southwestern Asia in ancient times, it is probable that the early glaciations extended only as far south as the northern
boundaries of southwestern Asia, and the former fertility of North Arabia has been proved by data recently obtained.

Archaeological evidence shows that man in palaeolithic and neolithic phases of culture inhabited the North Arabian Desert. A typologically Chellean coup-de-poing was found by the writer at a total depth of eleven feet six inches in the gravels near Bayir Wells, which lie some forty-five miles east of Petra. Also, many thousands of flint implements were collected from surface sites in this region.

The river gravels of Palestine have yielded Chellean and Acheulean implements, and near the Sea of Galilee a fragmentary Neanderthal skull was found. Since the spring of 1928 Miss Dorothy Garrod has found Neanderthal human remains and artifacts in the caves on the pleasant slopes of Mount Carmel.

According to Dr. G. G. MacCurdy seven Neanderthal skeletons have been found in the Cave of the Kids near Haifa. The detailed study of these fossil remains should throw a flood of light on the skeletal structure and anatomy of Neanderthal man.

In Egypt nearly fifty years ago, Pitt-Rivers discovered palaeoliths in the lowest river terrace west of Luxor. Père Bovier-Lapière has collected palaeolithic and neolithic implements near Cairo, and his collection at the Collège de la Sainte Famille, Cairo, which I have been privileged to examine, contains a wealth of valuable material.

Vignard discovered a peculiar, microlithic industry in the Kom Ombo plain. These implements can be dated stratigraphically. Sandford and Arkell found in the river terraces of the Nile implements resembling those collected from the terraces of the rivers Thames and Somme in northern Europe.

The area under discussion, namely southwestern Asia, is now occupied by members of the Mediterranean Race, which includes the various Semitic and Proto-Semitic groups. Sergi introduced the term “Mediterranean” about the beginning of this century to include the original population, who dwelt beside the shores of the Mediterranean. Furthermore, he claimed that at one time this race also occupied Western Europe, North Africa and its eastern boundaries as far south as the equator. Sergi also suggested that East Africa might have been the home of the Mediterranean Race.

Elliot Smith classifies the members of this race as follows: wavy brown or black hair; skin color, olive brown; eyes, dark with black irises; stature, average (males 5 ft. 5 in., females 5 ft.); the head is long and narrow (dolicocephalic) with a cephalic index of between 70 and 75.

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1 A detailed geological and climatological study of the Near East would be a most valuable contribution.
3 By F. Turville-Petre in June, 1925. See Researches in Prehistoric Galilee, London, 1927 (British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem).
4 Science News Letter, June 18, 1932.
5 By the Joint Expedition of the American School of Prehistoric Research and the British School of Archaeology, Dr. Theodore D. McCown, Leader.
6 Called the Sebilian.
8 Since these are linguistic terms connoting a definite culture, I suggest the term Proto-Mediterranean.
Living members of this race are to be found beside the shores of the Mediterranean and, according to Elliot Smith (p. 140), “the peoples of Arabia and many of the inhabitants of Palestine and Syria conform in all essential respects to the Mediterranean type. The earliest inhabitants of Mesopotamia, the Sumerians, were members of the Mediterranean Race.”

This last sentence is of particular interest, since the statement that the early basic population of the “Fertile Crescent” was dolicocephalic has been proved by the skeletal material excavated\(^1\) at Kish\(^2\) and Jemdet Nasr\(^3\) where the trenches extended down to virgin soil. The general theory, however, is that the Sumerians were brachycephalic, although at the present moment final and conclusive evidence is still absent. The majority of Sumerian statues and statuettes by contemporary artists are round-headed, which lends some measure of support to this theory. Furthermore, in the post-neolithic phase at Kish brachycephalic skulls have been found suggesting thereby that part of the population, probably the ruling families, were non-Mediterranean in type. As a final note let me add that among the four hundred modern Arabs of the Kish area measured anthropometrically in 1927–28,\(^4\) there is a small but definite brachycephalic strain in the population.

At the present time it is impossible to say if the Sumerians were brachycephalic or dolicocephalic, but the evidence available suggests that the first-comers into the watered lands of Mesopotamia were long-headed (the Proto-Mediterraneans) and that they were “smitten with weapons” by the round-headed Sumerians, who swept down upon them from the east or south at an early date.

Speiser\(^5\) gives an interesting interpretation of the important discoveries at Tell Billa and Tepe Gawra, writing (p. 32) as follows: “It still commends itself, therefore, as the most probable solution that the non-Sumerian and non-Semitic mountaineers were the first to settle in Mesopotamia, following the course of the Two Rivers that were building up the fertile valley. The Semites reached the country from the south, and probably also from the west, while the Sumerians arrived at the head of the Persian Gulf some time later, to form the third ethnic stratum of the country. Whether they had come by land or by sea, whether in a single wave or in several successive invasions, no one can say as yet . . . ”

This theory adds a third ethnic group to the already complicated “Garden of Eden” district, and Speiser adds (p. 35) that “as far as our present indications go, we have to look towards the Caucasus for the home of the original settlers of Mesopotamia.”

Keith\(^6\) (p. 387) writes as follows: “Where were the ancestors of the Cro-magnon and Predmost people in Mousterian times? Europe was then inhabited by men of

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\(^1\) By The Field Museum–Oxford University Joint Expedition.


\(^3\) The only complete skull contemporaneous with painted pottery (Geometric II of Susa) was hyper-dolicocephalic. See *J.R.A.S.*, 1922, pp. 967–970.

\(^4\) In my forthcoming memoir on the physical characters of 666 Arabs of Central Mesopotamia, the statistics are recorded in full. This publication is now in Field Museum press.


the Neanderthal stock. The evidence, such as it now stands, leads us to regard the southwestern region of Asia as the cradle of evolution of the white man, and that in the Cro-magnons and Predmostians we have the European pioneers of this stock. The modern Arab is probably a direct descendant of the stock which, in pleistocene times, gave Europe its first neanthropic invaders. Such a theory serves better than any other to explain the regional distribution of the great living stocks of mankind. There is, on the other hand, a strong school which regards Africa as the most likely homeland of the Caucasian stock—both ancient and modern."

In the introduction to my report on the physical characteristics of the Arabs of Central Mesopotamia, where Sir Arthur Keith has so masterfully interpreted the meaning of the anthropometric statistics collected (see note 1, p. 7), he concludes that the racial affinities are with Africa rather than with Asia, which thereby suggests an early link through a common ancestral group.

It must also be noted that the shaded area on the map (Fig. 1) lay to the south of the great ice sheet and was, therefore, habitable from a climatological point of view. Furthermore, man in various palaeolithic cultural phases left his stone weapons and tools to bear witness to his existence in this region. The bones of Neanderthal man have been preserved in the caves of Palestine, and the associated flint implements and fauna suggest an intimate relationship with the contemporary inhabitants of the North Arabian and Syrian Deserts.

On the surface of the sands of the great Rub’al Khali, to the south, Philby 1 found flint implements of neolithic and bronze age types, and Bertram Thomas 2 brought back a perfect flint arrowhead from the sands of Sannam. These discoveries imply that central and south Arabia were also inhabited prior to historic times.

In conclusion the area suggested by the writer as the probable homeland of neoanthropic man has yielded archaeological evidence of its continuous inhabitation from early palaeolithic down to contemporary times, and its geographical location occupies a central position between Africa, Europe and Asia.

With the cordial cooperation of the various governments throughout the world, combined with scientific exploration both by the spade of the archaeologist and the callipers of the physical anthropologist, as well as research work by trained students in other branches of anthropology, the fascinating problem of the cradle of the human race may be solved to the general satisfaction of those interested in the question. I am, however, afraid that this Utopian state cannot be reached for at least several generations to come.

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1 In a personal communication to the author dated June 2, 1932.
2 Arabia Feliz, New York, 1932, p. 207.